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The Landscape: Verboort

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Verboort

by Michael Burnham

It's the first Saturday in November, and the grounds of Visitation Catholic Church in the Washington County town of Verboort are awash in Pacific Northwest rains and Old World smells. The incessant drizzle speckles eyeglasses, muddies mascara, floods tire tracks, and soaks even the hardest soles.

The late Oregon writer Ken Kesey called this perennial period of grayness, simply, "The Rains." And the cold, consistent drizzle is as much the subject of conversation today as the sausage that summoned the hearty crowd, lined up 200-people deep at 9 a.m. It's tradition, after all.

"What surprises me most each year is that the rain doesn't stop people from coming out here," says Jerod Verboort, the great-great-nephew of Fr. John Verboort, the Dutch-American pioneer-priest who founded the town. From Jerod's vantage point, snug beneath a tarpaulin awning between the red-brick church and packed dining hall, he sees people clad in hooded jackets, camouflage caps, work boots — even the odd pair of wooden clogs. People in one line wait to buy bulk sausage from a permanent smokehouse in back of the church. Folks in another line seek seats inside of the dining hall for the 77th annual Verboort Sausage & Kraut dinner.

Don and Shirley Laxton of Vancouver, Wash., huddle together and spy the long lines from a boggy field-turned-parking lot across the street from the church and its yard of California redwoods. Don clutches

cash with one hand and the front of his soaked flannel shirt with the other. No umbrella here — and apparently no decision about which line to stand in.

Don is thinking about the bulk sausage. Beef, pork, and secret spices. Hearty winter meals to come.

Shirley's dreaming about the \$15, all-you-can-eat dinner: Dutch sausage, sauerkraut, mashed potatoes, green beans, applesauce, rolls, lemon pie, coffee. Warm coffee. "He doesn't want to miss out on the bulk sausage," Shirley says, as the "Pennsylvania Polka" plays repeatedly from outdoor speakers. "One year we came all of the way out here and it was gone."

Staggering, considering how much food is served and sold here. In 1934, to celebrate the end of the fall harvest, Maggie VanDyke served up 198 pounds of sausage and 10 gallons of sauerkraut to her fellow parishioners. These days, the parish's army of 700 volunteers typically serves more than 17 tons of sausage to about 10,000 people in a single day.

About 40 people make the sausage, but no one claims to really know the secret recipe. Other folks serve the dinners, fold the napkins, direct the cars, or sell homemade quilts. The proceeds assist the operation of Visitation Catholic School, but the dinner is never really done. "When this is over, we start again," says Lois Verboort, the great-great niece of Fr. Verboort and owner of an honest-to-goodness Dutch windmill in her front yard. "You've got to

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— Sister Clare Vandecoevering

have something for little old ladies to do."

The sausage dinner is always on the first Saturday of November, an event that summons folks from as far away as California, Idaho, and Washington. One year, a group of Japanese tourists showed up, Jerod Verboort recalls. "We've had years past where people have camped out front for the bulk sausage," he adds.

Sister Clare Vandecoevering peers out the church doors at the people coming and going. Some are lining up and hunkering down; others are walking away with big grins and plastic bags full of sausage. The 81-year-old nun, who attended the Visitation school and taught at it, has seen it all before. "I don't know how they can bear the rain," she says bemusedly. "I say my prayers for good weather, but we never get it."

Parishioners occasionally consider pushing the dinner up a month, before The Rains. But tradition runs deep in Verboort, Jerod says, sufficiently snug in a Beavers ball cap and water-proof jacket.

"Besides, if the weather were better," he adds with quick wit, "we might get more people out here and not be able to feed them all." **M**



Visitation Catholic Church and the Verboort Sausage Festival.
Photographs by Michael Burnham